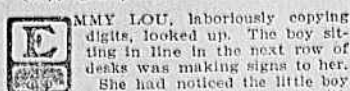


EMMY LOU IN THE PRIMER CLASS.

THE RIGHT PROMETHEAN FIRE

By Mrs. GEORGE MADDEN MARTIN.
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EMMY LOU, laboriously copying digits, looked up. The boy sitting in line in the next row of desks was making signs to her. She had noticed the little boy before. He was a square little boy, with a sprinkling of freckles over the bridge of the nose and a cheerful breadth of nostril. His teeth were wide apart, and his smile was broad and constant. Not that Emmy Lou could have told all this. She only knew that to her the knowledge of the little boy concerning the things peculiar to the primer world seemed "No doubt."

And now the little boy was beckoning Emmy Lou. She did not know him, but neither did she know any of the seventy other little boys and girls making the primer class.

Because of the popular prejudice against whooping cough, Emmy Lou had not entered the primer class until late. When she arrived, the seventy little boys and girls were well along in alphabetical lore, having long since passed the A, B, C of initiation, and become glibly eloquent in a point where the L, M, N, O, P slipped off their tongues with the liquid ease of repetition and familiarity.

"But Emmy Lou can catch up," said Miss Clara, the teacher, looked Aunt Cordelia's optimism, also her plumpness. "No doubt she can," agreed Miss Clara, politely, but without enthusiasm. Miss Clara had stopped from the graduating rostrum to the school room platform, and she had been there some years. And when she has been there some years, and is already battling with seventy little boys and girls, one cannot greet the advent of a seventy-first with acclimation. Even the fact that one's hair is red is not an always rare indication that one's temperament is sanguine also.

So in answer to Aunt Cordelia, Miss Clara replied politely, but without enthusiasm. "No doubt she can," said Miss Clara, and then she turned to the next pupil. Then Aunt Cordelia went, and Miss Clara gave Emmy Lou a desk. And Miss Clara then rapping sharply, and calling some small delinquent to order, Emmy Lou's heart sank within her.

Now Miss Clara's tones were tart, because she did not know what was to come. In a class of seventy, spare time is not offering for the bringing up of the backward. The way of the primer teacher was not made easy in a public school of twenty-five years ago.

Miss Clara told the new pupil to copy digits. Now what digits were Emmy Lou had no idea, but being shown them on the blackboard, she copied them diligently. And as the time went on, Emmy Lou went on copying digits. And her endeavor being to avoid the notice of Miss Clara, it happened the needs of Emmy Lou were frequently lost sight of in the more assertive claims of the seventy.

When Emmy Lou was not catching up, and it was January.

But to-day was to be different. The little boy nodding and beckoning. So far the seventy had left Emmy Lou alone. As a general thing the herd crowds toward the leaders, and the laggard brings up the rear alone.

But to-day the little boy was beckoning. Emmy Lou looked up. Emmy Lou was pink-checked and chubby and in her heart there was no guile. There was an ease and a swagger about the little boy. And he always knew when to stand up, and what for. Emmy Lou more than once had failed to stand up, and Miss Clara's reminder had been sharp. It was with a bell rang one must stand up. But what for, Emmy Lou never knew, until after the others began to do it.

But the little boy always knew. Emmy Lou had heard him, too, out on the beach, glibly tell Miss Clara about the mat, and a bat, and a black rat. To-day he stood forth with confidence and told Emmy Lou a fat and round and was glad to have the little boy beckon her.

And in her heart there was no guile. That the little boy should be holding out an end of a severed India-rubber band and inviting her to take it, was no small thing. Emmy Lou had been happening in the primer world every day.

The very manner of the infant classification breathed mystery, the sheep from the goats, so to speak, the little girls all one side the central aisle, the little boys all the other—and to overstep the line of demarcation, a thing too dreadful to contemplate.

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Whereupon the little boy wheeled about suddenly and fell to copying digits furiously. Nor did he look Emmy Lou's way, only drove his pencil into his slate with a fervor that made Miss Clara run sharply on.

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Nor did Emmy Lou dream that across the aisle remorse was eating into a little boy's soul. Or that, along with remorse, there went the image of one Emmy Lou, defenseless, pink-checked and smiling bravely.

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dreamed that it was because she was watching him that the little boy was moved to this brilliant exhibition. Presently, reaching the end of his page, he looked up, casually, incidentally. It seemed to be borne to him that Emmy Lou was there, whereupon he nodded. Then, as if moved by a sudden impulse, he dove into his desk, and after ostentatiously searching in, on, under it, brought forth a pencil. Nor did he dream that it was for this the little boy had been there since before Uncle Michael had unlocked the primer door.

Emmy Lou looked across at the pencil. It was a slate pencil. A fine, about new slate pencil, grandly encased for half its length in gold paper. One bought them at the drug store across from the school, and one paid for them the whole of five cents.

Just then the bell rang. Emmy Lou got up suddenly. But it was the bell for school to take up. So she sat down. She was glad Miss Clara was not yet in her place.

After the primer class had filed in with panting and frosty entrance, the bell rang again. This time it was the right bell. The primer class began to move. So again Emmy Lou got up suddenly and by following the little girl ahead learned that the bell meant, "Go out to the bench."

The primer class, according to the degree of its infant precocity was divided in three sections. Emmy Lou belonged to the third section. It was the last section and she was the last one in it, though she had no idea what a section meant, nor why she was in it.

Yesterday the third section had said, over and over, in chorus, "One and one are two, and two are four." But to-day they said, "Two and one are three, two and two are four."

Emmy Lou wondered, four what? Which put her behind, so that when she began again they were saying, "Two and four are six." So now she knew. Four is six. What was six? Emmy Lou did not know.

When she came back to her desk the pencil was there. The fine, new, long slate pencil encased in gold paper. And the little boy was gone. He belonged to the first section, and the first section was now on the bench. Emmy Lou looked across and put the pencil back on the little boy's desk.

Then she prepared herself to copy digits with her stump of a pencil. Emmy Lou's were always stumps. Her pencil had a way of rolling off her desk, which she was gone, and one pencil makes many stumps. The little boy had generally helped her pick them up on her return. But strangely, from this time, her pencils rolled off no more.

But when Emmy Lou took up her slate there was a whole slide filled with digits in solid letters across so her heart grew light and free from the weight of digits, and she gave her time to the washing of her desk, a thing in which her soul revelled, and for which, patting after her little girl neighbors, she kept within that desk a supply of soap water and rags of a gray and unobscured nature, that never dried, because of their frequent using. When Emmy Lou first came to school, her cleaning paraphernalia consisted of a sponge secured by a string to her slate, and a rag.

And in her heart there was no guile. That the little boy should be holding out an end of a severed India-rubber band and inviting her to take it, was no small thing. Emmy Lou had been happening in the primer world every day.

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et and dipper. And on his return he came up the center aisle between the shelves and the seats.

Emmy Lou had no idea what happened. It took place behind her. But there was another little girl who did. A little girl who boasted curls, yellow curls in tresses about her head. A beautiful little girl, who affected great horror of the little boys.

And what Emmy Lou failed to see was this: The little boy, in passing, deftly lifted a cherished curl between finger and thumb and proceeded on his way.

The little girl did not fall the little boy. In the suddenness of the surprise she surprised even him by her outcry. Miss Clara jumped. Emmy Lou jumped. And the sixty-nine jumped. And, following the little girl, she lifted her voice in hysterical lament.

Miss Clara sat erect. The primer class held its breath. It always held its breath when Miss Clara sat erect. Emmy Lou held tightly to her desk beside. She wondered what it was all about.

Then Miss Clara spoke. Her accents cut the silence.

"Billy Traver!" Billy Traver stood forth. It was the little boy.

"Since you seem pleased to occupy yourself with the little girls, Billy, go to the bench!" Emmy Lou trembled. "Go to the bench!" What unknown, inglorious terrors lay behind those dread, laconic words, Emmy Lou knew not.

She could only sit and watch the little boy turn and stamp back down the aisle and around the room to where along the wall hung rows of feminine apparel.

Here he stopped and scanned the line. Then he paused before a hat. It was a round little hat with silky nap and a curling brim. It had rosettes to keep the ears from drooping, and that led beneath the chin. It was Emmy Lou's hat. Aunt Cordelia had cautioned her to care concerning it.

The little boy took it down. There seemed to be no doubt in his mind as to what Miss Clara meant. But then, he had been in the primer class from the beginning.

Having taken the hat down he proceeded to put it on his own shock head. His face wore its broad and constant smile. One would have said the little boy was enjoying the affair. As he put the hat on, the sixty-nine in the class became silent. It was Emmy Lou's hat. Aunt Cordelia had cautioned her to care concerning it.

Miss Clara, still erect, spoke again: "And now, since you are a little girl, get your book, Billy, and move over with the girls."

Nor did Emmy Lou understand why, when Billy, having gathered his belongings together, moved across the aisle and sat down with her, the sixty-nine laughed again. Emmy Lou did not laugh. She made room for Billy.

Nor did she understand when Billy treated her to a shrug and a surreptitious grin, his freckled countenance grinning beneath the rosetted hat. It never could have occurred to Emmy Lou that Billy had laid his cunning plans to this very end. Emmy Lou understood nothing of all that.

When she came back to her desk the pencil was there. The fine, new, long slate pencil encased in gold paper. And the little boy was gone. He belonged to the first section, and the first section was now on the bench. Emmy Lou looked across and put the pencil back on the little boy's desk.

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